

Ancient Southwestern Clothing Conserved

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What happened to prehistoric clothing that was excavated from NPS archeological sites in northern Arizona in the 1930s? For the most part, after being taken to museums to be preserved for future generations, many remained in the crumpled state in which they were found, as conservation treatments are time consuming and expensive. Due to creasing, many could not be adequately viewed or studied.



National Park Service cotton textiles at the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) before and after conservation treatment. All photos courtesy of Rachel Freer Waters, MNA.

Until now! The Flagstaff Area National Monuments recently received funding to conserve and rehouse rare fragments of ancient clothing from archaeological sites at Navajo, Walnut Canyon, and Wupatki National Monuments stored at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. Funding was obligated through the Colorado Plateau CESU to the Museum of Northern Arizona to hire Textile Conservator, Rachel Freer Waters, to conserve over 300 pieces of clothing from the 1100s and 1200s, ranging from everyday wear to technologically complex clothing with dyes. Now almost finished with the project, Ms. Waters, an American Institute for Conservation Professional Associate, has taken before and after pictures of the textiles, completed condition reports, employed a range of cleaning techniques and fiber relaxing treatments, and designed storage systems to provide preventative care.

When the project is finished by 2017, over 300 prehistoric textiles will look almost as good as when Ancestral Puebloans hand-wove them over 800 years ago! The following before and after images are of Walnut Canyon National Monument textiles.



Partial crumbled cotton textile, WACA 2167, before conservation treatment.



All the pieces of textile, WACA 2167, spread out in their new storage mount, after conservation treatment.



“Before treatment” photo of WACA 2168. Various pieces of cordage stored mixed together in an old cotton Ricker mount. The cotton of the Ricker mount caught onto the textiles in the mount, making it tedious to remove cotton pieces from the cordage.



“After treatment” photo of WACA 2168 in its new storage mount with individual pieces separated.